

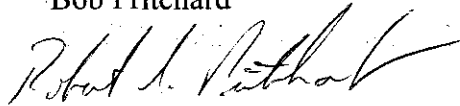
**An Examination into the Uses of and Preferences
for Academic Research by Public Relations Practitioners**

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Robert L. Pritchard", is written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

For public relations practitioners, research plays a role in virtually every task they set out to accomplish. To be successful, research is conducted when writing key messages, planning a media campaign, creating measurable goals and objectives, and even when proving to upper management that a specific strategy will be effective. Yet, the value that professionals place on research, especially when an educator conducts it, is often questioned. This paper examines the uses of and preferences for academic research by PR professionals.

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Introduction

If a group of public relations practitioners kept a record of every tidbit of research that they completed during the course of one week, how many hours would that be? What types of resources would they use—weekly or monthly publications, academic journals, information published on the Internet? Would they prefer to conduct the research themselves or contract it out to a specialist?

In the PR industry, these and other questions are rarely considered. For professionals working in agency, corporate and non-profit organizations, finding quick and inexpensive answers to their questions, whether they are PR-related or more general in nature, becomes their main concern. With little time and in some cases restricted budgets, conducting research is viewed as a necessary evil. It is essential in measuring the success or failure of a program, but at the same time, the application of various methodologies may create confusion and frustration.

Frequently, PR educators, who conduct a great deal of the research found in academic journals, experience similar frustrations. Not only do they face the challenges of crafting research questions, selecting a suitable methodology, and analyzing results, they also must prove beyond the shadow of a doubt that the study possesses applicability to practitioners. When the research is finally published, educators and professionals may still have differing opinions on its practicality.

Research plays a role in virtually every task practitioners set out to accomplish, and to be successful, it is conducted when writing key messages, planning a media campaign, creating measurable goals and objectives, and even while proving to upper management that a specific strategy will be effective. By examining resources and

methodologies as well as the personal views that individuals hold, practitioners and educators will both gain a greater understanding of how they can benefit their colleagues and the industry in its entirety.

Literature Review

Introduction

Research plays an integral role in the planning and evaluation of all public relations programs. Regardless of who conducts it, PR practitioners, college professor or graduate student, examining the vast array of resources available today offers new perspective and incites into the challenges that professionals face. As Don Stacks pointed out, implementing a program without adequate research causes people to base decisions on an educated guess or “gut instincts.” “Without research the practitioner cannot predict where a public relations program begins, how it evolves, or what the end product will be,” he says. “Quite simply, without research you cannot demonstrate the efficacy of your program (2002).”

The Value of Research

In *Public Relations Quarterly*, Edward L. Bernays offers insight into PR’s transformation from a game of “supersensory perception” to a profession based on sound research and evaluation. In 1914, while standing at the box office of the Gayety Theatre, he struggled to identify the socio-economic status and attitudes of audiences attending a production of *Daddy Long Legs*. Now, 90 years later, practitioners can be more confident in their ability to define target audiences thanks to the social sciences. “Research is basic to any action taken in dealing with any public,” Bernays concludes. “We must have a base line that indicates how we are to adjust to the public, educate it and inform it.” In

response to Bernays's statement, PR professionals have adapted to the research methodologies of the academic world, and everyday, it is progressing as a professional and scholastic discipline (1983).

Like the father of PR, practitioners have continued to recognize the value of research, and they demonstrate their understanding by utilizing it as they develop measurable goals and objectives that directly address an organization's needs. In simple tasks such as writing a newsletter or more complex programs like the planning and implementation of a strategic communications plan, award-winning professionals use research to identify their primary and secondary audiences as well as potential obstacles and opportunities. By relying on a thorough situation analysis and an examination of current trends, they develop sound tactics and strategies that are a result of the knowledge they acquire. When professionals conduct these kinds of research, a successful campaign will reap more than one benefit. According to *Public Relations Tactics*, the most successful campaigns result in the staff's recognition among its peers and more importantly, contributions to the organization's business goals (Hinrichsen 2003).

An individual's success as a professional also is based upon the same premise. After observing excellence in the PR field for 15 years, James and Larissa Grunig say the key to success in PR is not just "having a knack for it." It is one's ability to utilize critical thinking and a broad knowledge base when making all decisions. An analysis of nearly 5,000 questionnaires regarding factors for success in PR revealed that becoming familiar with the application of and uses for research, both quantitative and qualitative, is crucial in evaluating the success of PR practices. They concluded, "...senior practitioners who

understand the body of knowledge are most likely to be part of the dominant coalition and therefore most likely to have the power to implement excellent PR practices (2002).”

Although Hinrichsen, an expert in award-entry consulting, considers research to be an essential part of any PR activity, its role in the profession remained undefined until recently. In 1997, personal interviews with 122 professionals attending the PRSA National Conference shed some much-needed light on the relationship that exists between practitioners and their research. Conversations with participants confirmed notions that research truly is viewed as an asset, though it is not practiced with near the conviction the participants expressed. “The findings indicate that public relations professionals understand the importance of research to our companies, our clients, and our profession, yet misconceptions still persist—that it’s too expensive or too complicated,” says Kathleen Ward, APR Fellow PRSA, chair of the PRSA Research Committee. If research is to reach its full potential professionals must continue educating themselves on its techniques and applications (Public Relations Society of America 1997).

A study on the nature of public relations research comparing research in Sydney, Australia to Silver Anvil winners in the United States addressed the misconceptions that Ward mentions. Research methodologies included analyses of awards entries, interviews with professionals and a discussion with each interviewee with regard to how he defined the word research (Walker 1994)

Overall, the study focused on practitioners’ ability to communicate effectively, about their research needs and the tools used to meet them. Campaign entries for Australia’s Golden Target Awards in 1991 and 1992 illustrated discrepancies in research

language, which could be the root of the research problem. Of the 177 campaigns, 392 comments about research were included on 15 different types of research, yet whether the methodology was formal or informal was not always clear. Follow-up interviews with 20 award-winning practitioners also confirmed inconsistencies in the use of research. Practitioners' definition of research ranged from "the techniques or processes for fully understanding the opportunities and threats posed by any situation, using a whole variety of techniques" to just "learning the client's business." The wide range of definitions suggested that their concepts of research varied greatly, but their entries still illustrated the importance and value of research (Walker 1994).

The participants' attitude regarding research was "the more information I can get, the better off it is." Practitioners commented on "real research" in which informal processes like identifying target publics and gathering data were not included. Other methods included environmental monitoring and market research, but informal methods were preferred due to time and cost effectiveness. Despite a variety of research approaches, practitioners said they utilized research to justify further PR expenditure and prove the necessity of communications plans and campaigns. In conclusion, Gael Walker says, "Until public relations practitioners can communicate to practitioners of other disciplines the extent of preparation, strategy, and measurement that characterize their work, the real nature of this work cannot be understood, and their contribution toward organizational goals will not be valued (1994)."

The Relationship Between Practitioners and Educators

In 1993, several high-level practitioners agreed with the statement, "Research should be an integral part of any public relations program." As part of a survey and

workshop, 25 Arthur W. Page Society members presented their opinions and attitudes towards PR academicians. Results showed that they also said educators needed to spend less time on “theory and research methods” and dedicate more to “practical” research. This belief, although it is a paradox to the first, demonstrates the disregard that practitioners show for educators’ research efforts. To enhance the profession, both parties must come to an understanding of the other’s expectations (Adams 1993).

PR practitioners and educators may not always agree on the most applicable method of research, but they do recognize its prominence in the profession. A study titled *A Bibliometric Analysis of Public Relations Research* shows that the field of public relations developed significantly during a 15-year period, and educators were essential to its progress. By reviewing the citations of articles between 1975 and 1989, changes in the body of knowledge became apparent. Articles published in *Journalism Quarterly*, *Public Relations Research and Education*, and *Public Relations Research Annual* showed that authors no longer relied primarily on the social sciences as a resource. With its development as a profession, the study suggested that public relations has evolved into a scholarly discipline (Pasadeos and Renfro 1992).

The majority of the articles described quantitative research, and by its completion, the research conducted had increased in frequency by 15 percent. Along with a reliance on measurable results, the authorship of the articles also rose significantly. According to Pasadeos and Renfro, the percentage of educator-authors jumped from 54 percent to 89 percent, while practitioners’ authorship decreased from 33 percent to less than 10 percent. The changes in the educator to professional ratio demonstrated the development of PR into two distinctive types of PR—industry- and academic-oriented (1992).

From their research, they determined that the body of knowledge within public relations now consisted primarily of academic research. Of this they concluded, “We do not think that public relations scholars, regardless of how theoretically self-contained the discipline may or may not be, should remain confident in their ability to create a body of knowledge that in the future, could be viewed as strong base for theory building.” After the study, the authors recommended an exploration of the following research question: What is the impact of specific writings such as articles or monographs on the discipline? Their analysis, which illustrated a number of changes taking place in the industry, also showed a lack of confidence in the ability of professionals and educators to work together within the industry (Pasadeos and Renfro 1992).

Another study, which was published two years later, conducted the third wave of a Delphi survey with the purpose of determining gaps in the body of knowledge and identifying opportunities for future research. With a panel of more than 80 leading educators and practitioners, the group rank-ordered research questions for consideration by the Institute for Public Relations Research. They considered the following criteria:

- a.) Public relations professionals should find the answers to these questions immediately useful—“news you can use.”
- b.) Contributors to the institute should be proud to support research that investigates these questions.
- c.) Scholars should consider the probable results of the research to be a significant contribution to the body of knowledge in the field (McElreath and Blamphin 1994).

The study covered a wide array of research questions, but one, in particular, stood out: “Are employer expectations being met by the current nature of public relations

education? To what extent are employer expectations in conflict with the goals of higher education and professionalism in public relations?” The study demonstrated the importance of this question by citing numerous articles in the PRSA Book of Knowledge, which recommend that educators conform to the needs of employers (McElreath and Blamphin 1994).

Although practicing professionals see a need for more applicable research, public relations professors who have worked both in the field and a university setting view the relationship between practitioners and educators as lacking mutual respect (Thomsen 1997). After working for 25 years as a PR executive and more recently as a staff member at the University of South Carolina, John Guinivan, APR, says that professionals need to realize that research is essential to planning and evaluation rather than “scoff at the whole idea.” Lynne Sallot, APR, Fellow PRSA, adds that many practitioners don’t realize that referring to published resources and incorporating PR theories can enhance their programs and campaigns (Wenig 1999).

Judith VanSlyke Turk, PH.D., APR, Fellow PRSA, says that tension among educators and practitioners is obvious. “The sticking point seems to be a perception on the part of practitioners that when public relations academics do research, it doesn’t have any relationship to the real world,” she says. The truth is that a great deal of academic research is relevant, but educators need to better communicate its application in the field. Whether research is of immediate need or more explorative in nature, educators must offer a clear explanation of its purpose to practitioners (Shell 1995).

Methodology

From the perspective of a client or manager, implementing public relations plans without conducting thorough research is unacceptable. Without sufficient research and the creation of measurable goals, practitioners and clients are left wondering if a strategy was effective. Because management requires evidence that programs have accomplished the goals they set out for, practitioners have begun to recognize the importance of research. But they still view it as a challenge due to time constraints and small budgets (Walker 1994).

A survey of PRSA National Conference attendees identified budget restrictions as the most common barrier for conducting research, and while practitioners are doing more than three years ago, respondents still expressed a need for professionals to become better educated in research techniques and applications (Public Relations Society of America 1997). With clients, management and PR practitioners defining research as an integral part of the industry, the PRSA Educators Academy commissioned a study to assess professionals' research preferences and their relationship to educators. They were confident that improving communication regarding research needs between the two groups would aid professionals in overcoming the obstacles of little time and money.

In 2001, the PRSA Educators Academy established the Alliances for Learning Committee. The committee's charter was to build bridges between academicians and practitioners and find ways to make scholarly research more available to practitioners. To that end, Executive Board of the Educators Academy established the following list of goals and objectives for Alliances for Learning committee:

- To conduct a co-orientation study assessing the relationship of educators and practitioners to determine whether a problem actually exists and if so, to what extent.
- To conduct a study assessing the manner in which practitioners prefer to receive information related to research, and from the results make recommendations on making research accessible.
- In conjunction with the second study, to publish a compendium of research resources for the practitioner.

After formulating the committee's goals, committee chair Bob Pritchard requested a budget to conduct the studies from PRSA, which he did not receive. Despite a lack of funds, he continued plans to conduct the two studies, utilizing resources at Ball State University.

In the spring of 2003, Pritchard began a partnership with senior public relations major Andrea Paul, who agreed to create and distribute a survey of practitioners' research preferences. Over the summer, Paul examined literature regarding the value of research in PR and the relationship that exists between educators and practitioners. She summarized her findings in a literature review, which appears at the beginning of this paper.

By August, a survey was created, and in the following months, committee members reviewed it. After revisions were made and approved by the committee chair, the researcher posted the survey on InQsit, Ball State's on-line test and quiz system. The 28-question survey addressed the following areas: resources accessed, views on research, research methodologies, and research practices and demographics. Questions types included Likert-type scales and rank-order. Free-response blanks were incorporated into the survey as appropriate.

To insure the accuracy of results and prevent bias, the study was based on a probability sample taken from the 2003 PRSA Directory. By selecting every 98th individual in the national listing, a systematic random sample was created. In total, 200 PRSA members would receive the survey. During October of 2003, the selected individuals received a short message explaining the importance of the study and inviting them to provide anonymous feedback. Within the text, the researcher provided a link directly to the survey. For the second and third week, she also distributed reminders with a brief explanation and survey link to each contact.

After receiving one response and extending the deadline for the sample by one week, a plan for a subsequent sample was created. From the 2003 PRSA Directory, the researcher compiled a list of chapter presidents within the East Central District. Each received an e-mail message that explained the Educators Academy study and urged them to contact their members regarding the survey. When presidents were contacted, the sample size was undetermined as a result of membership fluctuation within each chapter. At the end of the study in early December, feedback from participating chapter presidents revealed that approximately 802 PRSA members in the East Central District had the opportunity to participate in the survey. The results were based on memberships reported by the following chapters: Central Michigan, Dayton-Miami, Greater Cleveland, Pittsburgh, Western Michigan and West Virginia. Nineteen practitioners from the second sample completed the survey for a total of 20 responses.

Findings

Empirical evidence from the 20 responses served as results from which to make interpretations. To parallel the Alliances for Learning committee's original objectives, the researcher analyzed the data, keeping research's in the profession and the relationship between PR professionals and educators in mind. The survey consisted of 21 questions on a five-point Likert scale as well as five multiple-choice questions addressing both of these topics. Demographics were included as multiple choice items, but they were not required. Fortunately, 18 of the 20 participants volunteered their demographic information. The information will be referred to using the following categories: 25-35-year-old group; 46-55-year-old group; agency/marketing/crisis communications, corporate/non-profit/government or military; and other positions.

In the "Resources Accessed" section, 75 percent of participants indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "I read monthly publications more than books and weekly publications." Individuals in the 25-35-year-old group showed a significantly greater reliance on weekly publications than participants who were 46-55-years-old (25-35 M=4.143, 46-55 M=3.429).

Overall, 16 of 20 individuals relied on the Internet for answers to their research needs, but the statement "I consult published research on the Internet on a regular basis," was less agreeable. Half of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, 10 percent were unsure, 35 percent disagreed, and five percent strongly disagreed. When reviewing the results from a demographic standpoint, respondents who worked for a corporation, non-profit organization or with the government or military utilized research published on the

Internet far more than anyone else (Agency/marketing/crisis $M=3.333$, Corporate/non-profit/government or military $M=3.667$, Other $M=2.5$).

With regard to specific publications and resources, the majority of survey participants said that they utilized The Public Relations Strategist, PR Week and PRSA's Professional Development Resources with the most frequency, but academic research was not viewed with the same applicability. To the statement, "During the past 6 months, I have used the results from a research study produced by an academician in the implementation of my public relations practices," 65 percent were unsure, disagreed or strongly disagreed. Those in agency, marketing, crisis communications and "other positions" demonstrated the greatest disagreement (Agency/marketing/crisis $M=2.667$, Corporate/government or military $M=3.0$, Other $M=2.167$) These results support the conclusion in the literature review that practitioners don't realize the value of academic research.

In the "Views on Research" section of the survey, results showed that practical experience rather than PR journals serves as a source for knowledge about research. Thirteen of 20 professionals agreed with the statement, "the majority of my knowledge about research methods and practices comes from practical experience," while only five indicated that they acquired their knowledge from academic journals. Since, the majority of respondents relied on practical experience for research knowledge, one would assume they would favor more informal research practices, but the results indicated a split in opinions. Practitioners did not indicate a significant preference for either method.

In terms of practicality, the overwhelming majority believed that academic research is based primarily in theory. Fifty-five percent agreed, and 15 percent strongly

agreed with the following sentence: “I generally view research conducted by an academician as more theoretical and less practical or applied.” Eighteen of 20 or 90 percent of respondents said that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “When research is based on a methodology that I can use myself, I find it more applicable to my profession.”

With regard to research methodologies, practitioners valued qualitative information such as interviews and focus groups nearly as much as quantitative information like statistics and measures of central tendency. Fifteen respondents also indicated that they found referencing case studies helpful when conducting research. The final area that this section explored was the professional’s views on the usefulness of the following methodologies: content-analysis, survey research, in-depth interviews, focus groups, case studies, longitudinal studies and mixed method studies.

Unfortunately, participants did not answer the question in the manner that the researcher intended. The question was designed so that participants could rank-order the methodologies from one to seven in terms of general applicability (1= most useful, 7= least useful). Since very few answered the question in this way, only those results completed in the manner intended were included in the analysis. To be as objective as possible, the researcher measured the frequency that each was ranked. Focus groups were deemed most useful, while interviews and mixed method studies took the second and third highest rankings, respectively.

Although professionals indicated that they valued research, their practices varied a great deal. When faced with the statement “I prefer to contract out my research work whenever my budget allows,” responses were across the board from strongly agree to

strongly disagree. Participants with positions in agencies, marketing and crisis communications, in particular, were significantly more in favor of contracting out their research work (Agency/marketing/crisis $M=3.167$, Corporate/government or military $M=2.333$, Other $M=2.667$). This supports the literature, which states that clients at a PR agency will often ask for market research as proof that a PR program is worthwhile.

In terms of personal information provided by respondents, eight females and 11 males completed the survey. Of those, seven were 25-35-years-old, two were 36-45-years-old, eight were 46-55-years-old and one was 56-65-years-old. Four worked alone. Ten were members of an office with between two and five people. Four others worked with 6-15 people, and one person worked in an office of 26-50 individuals. Organizations were represented with the following frequencies: non-profit-2, agency-5, corporation-2, crisis communications-2, event planning or community relations-2, government or military-5, and other 2. These included professionals in education, a non-profit medical center and consulting work.

Discussion

Although the majority of the sample said that they “read public relations or other communications-related publications that include academic research” at least once a month, the preference for weekly publications may be related to actual working experience. Younger professionals typically have less experience and so they may consult weekly publications as a way of becoming more informed about industry news. The results support the recommendations in the literature stating that young professionals should become familiar with the benefits research can bring to the PR industry.

Young professionals and Internet use also appeared to have a connection. Survey results showed that 80 percent of those surveyed consult the internet to answer their research questions, but not nearly as many rely on research published on the Internet. Of those who do, four of the six respondents were under the age of 35. The dependency on the Internet for research and published documents may be related to the group's makeup, which consisted of younger, more technology-savvy individuals.

In terms of practitioners' views on research, respondents indicated a need for research that applies directly to skills they use everyday, and practical experience was the main source for their research. If PR practitioners prefer practical research as the survey indicated, these results suggest that PR professionals are not using the research educators conduct. This conclusion was confirmed by more than half of the sample who agreed or strongly that academic research conducted by academicians is "more theoretical and less practical or applied." Instead of research conducted at the university, they opt for studies that seem more applicable. The literature also addresses this issue, but from an educator's point of view. Van Syke explains that academicians need to make a greater effort to show how their research is advantageous to practitioners. By doing so, results show that their work would most likely gain greater acceptance and respect by the PR profession.

Conclusions and Implications

Because the responses to the survey were extremely limited, the results of the survey, clearly, cannot be generalized to practitioners across the nation or the world. The survey and research should be viewed as a pilot study for further work by the Educators Academy and Alliances for Learning committee. In the future, members will be able to better address research questions that the organization's objectives address.

Overall, the survey was a useful instrument in initially measuring practitioners' preferences and attitudes towards research resources, methodologies and practices. Its only drawback was the rank-order question that was misunderstood by the majority of respondents. The confusion was due, in part, to the question format on the InQsit system as it allowed respondents to rank more than one methodology as the same number. If questions were re-used in a similar study, the question would need to be rewritten, and any other revisions could be approved by the Academy.

The Academy also may consider including questions on the following subjects:

- 1.) How often the practitioner conducts research.
- 2.) If he utilizes market research and for what purpose.
- 3.) The ways in which research has affected an organization's PR efforts.

To insure that the results can be generalized in subsequent studies, the researcher must determine how he will increase the number of respondents. After creating two samples totaling more than 1,000 PRSA members, 20 people participated. The lack of respondents shows that practitioners will not take five minutes to fill out a survey because it will benefit the PR profession. They are asking themselves, "How will it benefit me?" Possibilities to boost numbers may include providing an incentive such as a chance in a \$500 drawing, a discount on a national PRSA event or gift certificates. Once the Educators Academy can bring something of worth to the practitioners, the study will seem worthwhile.

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